

# **Evaluation of Indiana's First Steps Early Intervention System**

**November 2003**

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This document was compiled and produced, in part, through an Indiana Unified Training System project, under Contract #IFSSA53-03-SS-0203, from the Bureau of Child Development, Division of Family and Children, Indiana Family and Social Services Administration. Indiana University's Indiana Institute on Disability and Community provided additional support. The contents do not reflect endorsement by the funding agencies or Indiana University.

Copies of this document are available through download:

<http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/ecc/downloads/November2003FSReport.pdf>

This document is available in alternative formats on request.

## *Acknowledgements*

*Dear First Steps Families and Service Coordinators,*

*As we recognize our one-year anniversary of the implementation of the First Steps Evaluation Project, it is time to gratefully acknowledge all of you who have taken the time and made the effort to contribute to this process. We know that we are creating a better system through your combined efforts.*

*Thank you all.*

## Introduction

Indiana's First Steps Early Intervention System serves thousands of children and families each year, and has grown dramatically since its inception. Because of the success First Steps has experienced in identifying and finding children and families who are in need of early intervention services, the Bureau of Child Development, Division of Families and Children, Family and Social Services Administration has asked this question:

### ***What impact is Indiana's First Steps Early Intervention System having on the children and families it serves?***

Over the past few years, the Bureau of Child Development has contracted with the Early Childhood Center at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community, Indiana University to develop and implement a statewide evaluation system that answers this question. The Bureau of Child Development undertook this task for several reasons. First, a statewide, outcomes-based, evaluation system would enable documentation and communication of the benefits of First Steps to major decision-makers at local and state levels. Second, it would help to expand the focus beyond compliance with the law to include service quality. Third, it would provide information for improving services, particularly in tying training efforts to supporting desired outcomes. Finally, a statewide evaluation system would provide the information needed to continuously plan for the future.

The Early Childhood Center developed an evaluation system that strives to reflect the following features and guiding principles:

- The evaluation system is *statewide* (it touches all children and families receiving First Steps services) and *ongoing* (not a one-shot investigation).
- The focus is on the *outcomes* of First Steps for children, families and communities, not on services or procedures.
- Data collection procedures are *embedded into ongoing service routines* (to minimize, as much as possible, its intrusiveness and time consumption) and are locally implemented by service providers (no independent/outside investigators collecting data).
- Data analyses and findings are *understandable, accessible, and useable* in guiding local and state quality improvement efforts.

A final feature of the evaluation system was to *develop it with considerable input from all major stakeholders* of First Steps: families, providers, local decision makers, and state policy makers. At each step in the development process, from identifying key program outcomes, to piloting various data collection instruments and surveys, to implementing the system statewide, input from program consumers, providers, and decision makers has been, and will continue to be, sought.

## *Data Collection and Analyses*

The statewide implementation of the First Steps evaluation system began November 1, 2002. The goal of the system is to assess First Step's impact on all children and families exiting First Steps who have been in the system for a minimum of six months. Data collection has focused exclusively on measuring the impact of First Steps on the first six outcomes presented in Table 1.

Data is collected on children and families *entering* First Steps from three sources: 1) at intake with portions of the Combined Enrollment Form, 2) during the initial evaluation through the Family Interview, and 3) at the initial IFSP meeting with portions of the completed IFSP. Service Coordinators are asked to assemble and send documents from these three sources to the Early Childhood Center for data entry. Data is also collected on

children and families *exiting* First Steps. Service Coordinators are asked to conduct an Exit Interview with the family, and include developmental data from the other members of the team. The forms that are used to collect information from entering and exiting children and families are available on the First Steps web site: [http://www.state.in.us/fssa/first\\_step/outcomeseval.html](http://www.state.in.us/fssa/first_step/outcomeseval.html).

This first report summarizes the data collected for children and families exiting First Steps between November 1, 2002 and June 30, 2003. During this period of time, a total of 6084 families entered First Steps, and 5832 families exited First Steps. For families *entering* First Steps, partial and complete data was collected on 3173 families, or approximately 52% of all entering families. Of the total number of families exiting First Steps, 4315 (74%) of these families received services for a minimum of six months. Of this group of families, exit data was collected on 1496 (35%) families. During this eight-month period, a total of 74 families entered and exited First Steps who were in the program for at least six months. Of these 74 families, exit and entry data was collected for 12 families (16%).

Table 1  
First Steps Outcomes

1. Children attain essential and important developmental skills.
2. Children participate in inclusive community activities, settings, and routines.
3. Children (and families) are safe, healthy, and well nourished.
4. Families participate as members of the early intervention team and carry out recommendations that help them to help their child.
5. Families are connected to other families, associations, and organizations for emotional support.
6. Families advocate by exercising their rights in requesting and choosing goals, services, and supports.
7. Communities are informed and promptly refer families to First Steps.
8. Communities welcome and fully include children with disabilities and their families (e.g., child care, transportation, retail, housing, employment).
9. Communities provide all families access to health care services.

## *Results (Reported by Outcome)*

### **Outcome #1: Children attain essential and important developmental skills**

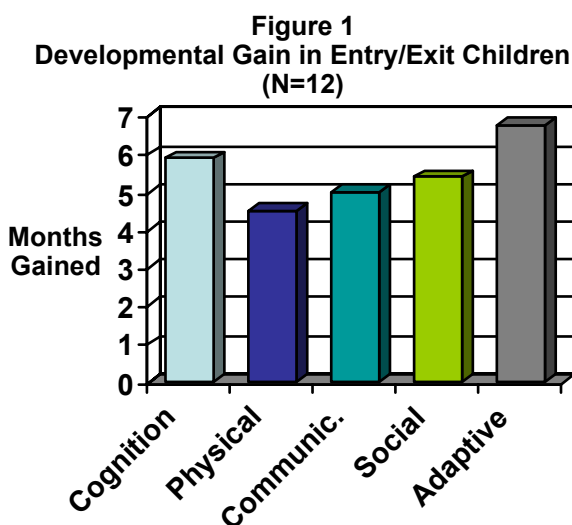
A primary outcome of First Steps is that children make developmental progress in the cognitive, communicative, physical, self-help, and social/emotional areas. To assess if First Steps is meeting this outcome, information was gathered from entering and exiting families in four areas:

1. Changes in the developmental age or level of children (between entry and exit)
2. Acquisition and demonstration of important developmental skills
3. Children's ability to function independently in typical family routines
4. Need for continued specialized services upon leaving First Steps

#### **1. *Changes in overall child development.***

Developmental information from the initial Individualized Family Service Plan was compared with the developmental information gathered by the Service Coordinator for the Exit Interview to determine general developmental gains for the 12 children who entered and exited First Steps during the report period.

The data indicates that 92% of the 12 children experienced some level of developmental gain in the major developmental areas. Figure 1 illustrates that, on the average, this small group of children made five to seven months of developmental gains across the five developmental areas.



#### **2. *Acquisition of Important Developmental Skills***

During Intake, entering families were asked to indicate which of 41 skills their children were able to perform. Upon exiting, families were once again asked to indicate which of the 41 skills their children were able to perform. The 41 skills included important functional skills such as walking, unfastening clothing, or using simple sentences. The results indicated:

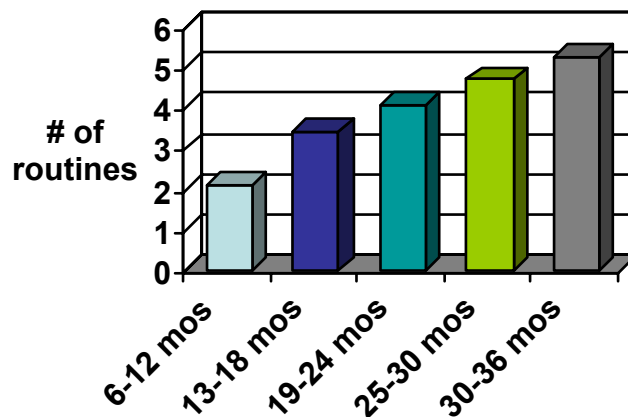
- 100% of the 12 children for whom both Entry and Exit information was available attained at least one or more skills (with an average of 11 skills gained per child);
- For all families who exited First Steps during this report period, children demonstrated, on the average, 78% of the 41 skills. For the three-year-old group only, children demonstrated an average 79.5% of the 41 skills; and
- 83% of exiting three-year-old children demonstrated a significant proportion ( $\geq 80\%$ ) of the 41 skills assessed.

### 3. *Independent Functioning in Everyday Family Routines*

During both the initial Family Interview and Exit Interview, families were asked to indicate which of 11 common daily routines their children were able to complete successfully. These routines included meal times, play times, dressing/undressing, getting up in the morning, and going to bed in the evening.

- 91% of children exiting from First Steps function independently in one or more 11 daily routines
- On the average, exiting families reported that their children functioned independently in up to five routines. Figure 2 breaks this down by the child's age at exiting.

**Figure 2**  
**Independent Functioning**  
**by Child's Age at Exit**



### 4. *Continued Need for Specialized Services*

During the Exit Interview, families were asked a number of questions to determine if their children needed specialized services after First Steps. Findings from these families indicated that 49% of the children leaving First Steps do not need continued specialized services. This was determined based upon exit data that indicated:

- 40% of all children exiting First Steps do so because they no longer needed early intervention services, and
- Of the families leaving First Steps because their child is three years of age, approximately 9% of those families did not indicate a need for continued services/therapy to address their children's developmental needs.

Of the other half of families still needing services to address their children's developmental needs, 35% of the families reported that their children were enrolled in special education, with an additional 16% reporting that their children needed continued outside therapy services after First Steps.

## Outcome #2: Children participate in inclusive community activities, settings, and routines.

The second outcome of First Steps is that children are able to participate in inclusive community activities, settings and routines with their families. This means that not only do children have the skills and behaviors to appropriately participate in various community settings, but that families have the knowledge, skills, and comfort level to make this happen. To assess if First Steps is meeting this outcome, information was gathered from entering and exiting families in the following area: Participation in community activities, settings, and routines

### 1. *Participation in community activities, settings, and routines*

As part of the Exit Interview, families were asked to identify to which community settings and activities their children had accompanied them in the past two weeks. A total of 13 different settings and activities were surveyed, including going to the grocery store, going to church or other religious service, child care, and visiting friends or neighbors. When surveyed, exiting families reported that:

- Most of their children (98%) had participated in at least two different community activities and/or settings in the past two weeks; and
- On the average, these children routinely participated in six of the 13 community activities, settings, and routines measured. Figure 3 presents data on the average number of community settings and activities children participate in by age.

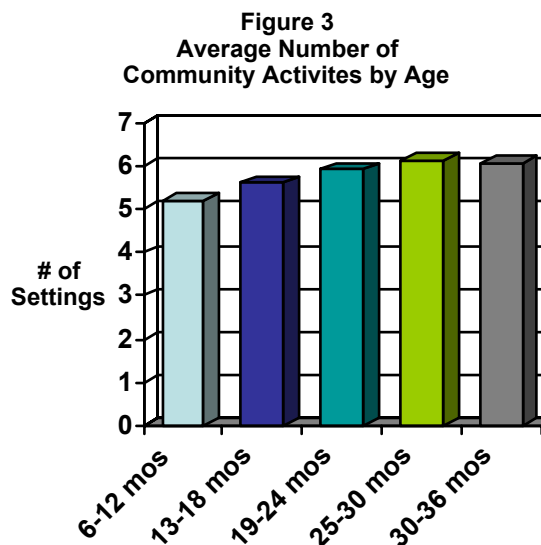


Table 2  
% of 3-Year-Olds Participating in Community Activities “All the Time”

Table 2 presents data on the percentage of exiting three-year-old children that participate all of the time in various family, community, and care and education settings.

Community Settings and Activities	Percent “All the Time”
1. Grocery shopping	57.3%
2. Shopping, but not for groceries	51.3%
3. Visiting relatives, friends, or neighbors	67.8%
4. Going out to eat	46.5%
5. Attending religious services	37.7%
6. Toddler play groups	20.6%
7. Family day care home	18.3%
8. Child care center	14.1%
9. Child care for children with special needs	3.5%
10. Head Start	1.9%
11. Community activities with other children	13.1%
12. Mother’s day out	6.9%
13. Go with family to community event	21.4%



### **Outcome #3: Children (and families) are safe, healthy, and well nourished.**

A third outcome of First Steps is to promote the safety, health, and well-being of children and their families. It recognizes that in order to facilitate children's developmental progress, they and their families must be safe, healthy and well nourished. To assess if First Steps is meeting this outcome, information was gathered from entering and exiting families in three areas:

1. Access to health care
2. Knowledge of household safety measures
3. Knowledge of proper nutrition

#### ***1. Access to health care***

During the initial Family Interview and at the Exit Interview, families were asked questions concerning access to health care, insurance, and childhood immunizations. By and large, most exiting families (93%) reported the presence of all positive indicators for children's health, including:

- seeing a doctor regularly (99%),
- being up-to-date on immunizations (95%), and
- having adequate health insurance (95%).

#### ***2. Knowledge of household safety measures***

Entering and exiting families were asked if they knew about recommended common household safety measures. Again, most exiting families (98%) reported knowing about and following recommended household safety measures such as the use of smoke detectors, car seats and safe storage of poisons and firearms.

#### ***3. Knowledge of proper nutrition***

Entering and exiting families were asked about their knowledge of proper nutrition and insuring their children have well-balanced diets. Again, most exiting families reported:

- knowing what to feed their children so that they have well-balanced meals (98%), and
- that their children do eat well and have balanced diets (90%).

## **Outcome #4: Families participate as members of the early intervention team and carry out recommendations that help them to help their child.**

As their children's *first teacher*, families serve an important role in the early intervention process. This role is maximized when they understand and participate actively as members of the team, and carry out recommendations that help their child, the fourth outcome of First Steps. To assess if First Steps is meeting this outcome, information was gathered from entering and exiting families in two areas:

1. Knowledge of First Steps and Family Roles
2. Participation as Team Members

### ***1. Knowledge of First Steps and family roles***

At both their entry into and exit from the First Steps system, families were asked if they understood the various components of the First Steps process and their role at each major step (e.g., evaluation, IFSP development, service provision). Results from the survey of exiting families indicated that:

- 99% of the families know and understand the First Steps process, including the purpose of First Steps evaluation, assessment, and the IFSP
- 99% of the families know they can share information during these times as well as agree or disagree with other members of the team.

### ***2. Participation as team members***

Also during entry and exit interviews, families were asked if they knew what roles they could assume during the First Steps process (e.g., share information), and if had exercised any of these roles. Most families reported knowing about and exercising their roles, including:

- sharing information during evaluation and assessment (99%),
- contributing outcomes at the IFSP meeting (98%),
- expressing agreement with the team (98%), and
- doing things at home that are part of their IFSP and the team's recommendations (99%).

Also, just under half of the exiting families (41%) surveyed indicated they had expressed disagreement with other team members at their last IFSP meeting.

## **Outcome #5: Families are connected to other families and natural community supports for emotional support.**

The fifth outcome of First Steps is to insure that families have access to the services and supports they need. These services and supports can be from the community as well as within their own circle of family and friends. To assess if First Steps is meeting this outcome, information was gathered from entering and exiting families in two areas:

1. Knowledge of available information and resources
2. Seeking out and accessing resources when needed

### ***1. Knowledge of available information and resources***

Exiting families were asked if they knew about how to access other families and/or community resources when needed for emotional support. Results from the survey of exiting families indicated that most of the time, 98% of the families know they can access resources such as: friends and other family members, respite care, other families with children who have special needs, family support groups, and/or formal community agencies. In addition, most exiting families reported that they have information and resources to meet needs in the areas of: transportation (95%), housing (96%), jobs (94%), and education (95%).

### ***2. Seeking out and accessing resources when needed***

Exiting families were also asked if they had connected with other families or community supports for information and emotional support in the past three months. Fifty-eight percent of the families reported accessing those resources some or most of the time.

## **Outcome #6: Families advocate by exercising their rights in requesting and choosing goals, services, and supports.**

The sixth and final First Steps outcome to be included in this report closely aligns with the fourth outcome of membership on the early intervention team, and focuses on families having the knowledge and skills to advocate on behalf of their child and family. To assess if First Steps is meeting this outcome, information was gathered from entering and exiting families in two areas:

1. Knowledge of First Steps rights
2. Exercising their rights

### ***1. Knowledge of First Steps rights***

Entering and exiting families were asked if they know and understand their rights under First Steps. Results from exiting families indicated that most (99%) do.

### ***2. Exercising their rights***

Entering and exiting families were also asked if they knew how to exercise these rights, including how to problem solve situations when disagreements arose with their service providers. Results from the survey of exiting families indicated that:

- 99% of the families reported knowing how to exercise their rights (e.g., share concerns and priorities, make program choices, request changes, and refuse permission);
- 98% of the families reported knowing how to work together with their service providers to find a solution if they disagreed with them; and
- 22% of the families reported disagreeing with their service providers in the past three months, with 89% of those families reporting that they were able to work together to find a solution.

In general, most families exiting First Steps reported having the knowledge and skills to advocate for their child in requesting and choosing services and supports.